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ABSTRACT

The obligations of public relations firms to their clients are emphasized in this paper. A sampling of the attitudes of public relations personnel regarding meeting client expectations is presented, and the effect that a public relations budget has on a company's level of influence on public opinion is discussed. Also stressed is the need for public relations firms to advise clients in dealing with large-scale social and political changes, going beyond merely meeting client expectations to actually suggesting and recommending more productive and realistic programs. Two examples of a public relations firm's advising a change in the direction of a company's program are described, one dealing with the salt industry and the other with a national roadbuilding association. (AEA)

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"MEETING CLIENT EXPECTATIONS"

Remarks by George Hammond
Chairman, Carl Byoir & Associates, Inc.

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Before Seminar on:

"Professional Public Relations in an Era of Rising Expectations"

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You will be surprised at my estimate that public relations has met clients' expectations 99% of the time, -- in two ways:

In 50% of the cases competent public relations supported by realistic clients, almost always has resulted in exceeding their expectations, not merely just meeting them.

In the other 49%, the clients' expectations were met because they expected nothing, and got it!

To understand more about all this, let's ask, first, how all that 50% satisfaction came about.

I maintain it's because the clients were of two kinds: First is a group, a large group, of realistic men and women who worry about their expectations. They understand what they can do and what they cannot do about them. And then they act. They employ capable public relations help. They provide the means to create circumstances that make their expectations attainable. So they are entitled to be satisfied.

The other kind of these happy clients is made up of just plain lucky people who hire other people, you and me, who somehow keep on passing miracles.

As to the melancholy 49% who expected nothing and got it, you can be sure that they do not let facts or even possibilities get in the way of their prejudices, which rule their expectations. They have made deathless that most useless of proud boasts, "I told you so."

Now some of you are thinking, "He's left out all that vast number of disappointed clients, those whose expectations we did not meet." I will let you in on a secret, -- they are all in that meager 1%, that rounds out 100%. You may disagree, but very, very few clients, I have found, really swallow their disappointment. The fact is that those who say, and say loudly, that we let them down will usually on closer scrutiny be found to have had a champagne taste and a beer pocketbook. They privately expected little from public relations but would like you to believe that they did.

What I have said is not as whimsical as it may sound. It summarizes where we are now.

You who are seminar regulars will discover that R.T. and his committee have done the unusual.

They've hit upon a new way to think about public relations. It's a theme so galvanic that I am deeply in their debt. The implications are boundless.

Asked to talk about "Meeting Client Expectations," I decided to do something new, -- for me. I wrote a memo about the subject I was supposed to cover here, asking our own people to give me in their own words their reactions to that topic, "Meeting Client Expectations."

You may find, as I did, that this is an almost magic trigger. In the past I have asked for such inputs and I have received some driblets. I have been helped by many of the suggestions.

But this time they poured in. To date I have received 85 responses, none less than a full page, and some several pages. As I read them, I red-circled paragraph after paragraph of insights that, frankly, were as stimulating as anything I have come across in years.

I want to give you some verbatim quotes.

The first is from a lady who works on one of our biggest accounts:

"The best way I know of to meet client expectations is to help create them and then work like hell to fulfill them.

"One way to 'meet' client expectations is really to exceed them in some significant way -- to do something outstanding that everyone will remember. That means coming up with at least one or two 'blockbuster' projects a year that get notable results. Clients tend to be more impressed with an outstanding project accomplished at the expense of some lower priority items than with a whole year's work that is thoroughly done, but does not include any exceptional results."

Another seems to disagree. He writes:

"The ability to meet client expectations requires bifocal vision. In my opinion you have to be able to see trees, not just grandiose, far-off forests. You have to plot strategy and expectations on day-to-day activities, not just glorious end-goals.

"So you build practical benchmarks into the program, making sure the client understands them and agrees to them."

Here's a terse piece of advice: "plan, propose, persist!" And a comforting thought:

"Anticipate the inevitable, don't fight it. This is especially relevant in this day of complex and controversial issues. My counsel is simply to anticipate the inevitable course of an issue and then help the client to be a leader in reaching out toward it in an orderly manner."

You'll recognize this practical tip:

"Even Robinson Crusoe couldn't get everything done by Friday. Set achievable timetables, and if slippage occurs, be sure the client knows it early -- not when you have to show up at the deadline with empty hands. When the workload surges and you find yourself over-extended, get help. Don't try to do everything yourself, which is a classic public relations syndrome. Be sure the

client knows the situation and accepts it. Most management people are reasonable and will accept legitimate explanations for unexpected delays or derailments."

And we should work this reminder into our basic procedure with clients:

"Given adequate notice, and full input from the client, we can anticipate problems and, at times, turn a potential negative into a positive. But, if given last-minute notice and sketchy details, the public relations practitioner's performance is hampered.

"The public relations professional is like the navigator in a plane. He can tell you where you are, where you're going and when you'll get there; but not if he's blindfolded."

This next quote foreshadows what I want to urge, so I'll pass it on now:

"Meeting client expectations can be summed up in one word -- anticipation. That is, exceeding his expectations by anticipating the problems he will be facing and guiding

him on how best to handle them.

"On this account the client has felt the pressures of government regulation and these pressures have been increasing in geometric proportion. The program we proposed several years ago and now operate included monitoring the flood of information and regulations coming from Washington, interpreting the likely impact of this flood by creating a variety of 'what if' scenarios on a regular basis, advising the client of what could happen one, two, five and ten years hence, proposing specific programs and projects to meet these problems, and assessing the results and needed changes in programs based on new or different information."

That's almost enough, but one more needs to be added, for it affects us all. It summarizes what change is presenting to us. I'm quoting:

"Today, many professional managers are running companies and this trend can be expected to become the rule in the future. They are a different breed than the old

entrepreneurs who had great seat-of-the-pants instincts. The new CEOs want to apply computer analysis and zero base budgeting to public relations as they do to any other company function. They listen to counsel, but are likely to pull in several opinions. They like consensus and are much harder to reach with warning flags. The public relations counselor of the future, in my opinion, will have to win the confidence and support of the entire management team to have his ideas listened to at the very top."

So R.T. has had his finger on an overlooked pulse, and I suggest that from now on we unshackle the public relations business by employing what I will call "The Detroit Connection." (Another good thing to come out of the Motor City).

If my experience of the past fortnight is typical, you will begin to be fascinated, as I am, by what happens when you exploit the mechanism of "expectations" in our practice.

For example, we all believe in planning; most of us are accustomed to goal-setting; many of us are

obliged to accept "management by objective." In one way or another they all deal with challenges, and the general impression is that the techniques are not only effective and time-honored, but applicable to public relations just as much as they are to marketing or administration.

But something new is added when you go the extra step and say, "Okay, now we've talked about the problem and I understand our goal, and I'm outlining our planning to achieve that goal. But would you mind if I asked, 'Do you expect all this to happen'?"

I will pause here so that you will become accustomed to the pause that that question will probably generate.

Suddenly there is a great difference between an elaborate plan and any shared conviction that it will succeed.

This new concept could change the level of effectiveness contributed by public relations people and public relations budgets. Why? Because it may be the long-sought way to compel a client to see ends in terms of means.

Goaded by the seminar we are all enjoying here, I really intend to push the expectation into the foreground. I believe that the shorthandedness of the public relations staff, the skinniness of the public relations budget, and a few other handicaps, are the result of no one raising the question of how real our expectations can be.

The comments I quoted were reassuring, in the main But I missed a common thread of concern over the changing nature of client priorities.

What my people emphasize is natural. As in the past they see our expertise employed to support marketing programs, to improve internal communications, to keep abreast of full disclosure needs, and to do the multiplying "chore boy" jobs that underpin so many budgets.

But do they and we recognize the area of increasing tension: where senior client executives are confronting barriers to their goal-attainment? One of our executive vice presidents sensed this in his response. He wrote:

"Looking forward (and remembering resolution

of similar frightening trends in the past) it's possible to visualize these developments that will bear on our client's work and expectations:

-- Continuing breakdown of honesty and morality in social and business life.

-- Absurd national legislative decisions based on political pressure based, in turn, on constituent pressure.

-- Growing dependence of business on government for cash, reorganization help and protectionism.

-- The arrival of due dates for solutions to problems that have been shoved off on creditors, the government or the courts.

-- Massive growth in communications techniques and systems that will dramatically speed information processing and delivery to individuals and groups.

Our clients know that they're not going to enjoy the luxury of status quo. They want and expect help from us in dealing with large-scale social and political changes that are coming at mind-boggling speeds. It will take hindsight and the particular kind of broad experience we bring to the client/agency

relationship to spot some of these changes and invent the most effective ways to deal with them."

You can argue that I am down-playing what you and I do most of the time. But if we believe that we serve best when we understand the problem, then we must be packed and ready to travel some uncharted paths.

In my judgment we have good guidelines. Let me mention two cases where some of these principles were involved:

An unusual public relations concept and a program grew out of our close association with members and management of the Salt Institute. This client hired us in the early 1970's to counter growing opposition to the use of salt to melt ice on roads and streets. The client asked that we mount one of the familiar Byoir high-impact publicity programs that would overpower the environmentalists who were against salt and win the hearts and minds of motorists and public works directors throughout the U.S.

snow belt.

Not a bad thought, at first glance, but it didn't have a chance. The environmentalists were right with the times. And there were millions of them. And they kept coming up with studies that showed salt ruined roadside vegetation, rusted cars and damaged drinking water supplies. And these studies got wide publicity.

We sat, fortunately, among the highest councils of the salt industry. And so we were able to go right to the top with our seemingly absurd plan that we should convince the environmentalists to join us in a program to use salt smarter. We called it the Sensible Salting program and it worked very well. Three states and more than 100 communities reversed legislation that would have banned salt.

But, more importantly, we were able to sell this program because we were in a position to recruit the trust and excite the interest of the people who were paying for our service. They had asked for a publicity program, but we put out fewer than a dozen releases over a two-year span. They had asked us to

fight the environmentalists, and we joined forces instead. They hired us because we were big, but the budget was small and our staff numbered one. The program worked because the client relationship worked and enabled us to embark on an uncharted path to win this almost unwinnable battle.

Now let me tell you about one of our biggest clients -- a huge association supported by all of the nation's roadbuilders -- that has only one employee. His job is the management of funds, control of our bills, merchandising results of the Byoir program, and things like that.

But the issues with which we deal are complicated ones, and developing themes and points of view is hard. Let me give you an example.

When The Road Information Program hired us, their first instructions were for us to develop a nationwide publicity program in support of a second system of interstate highways. That's what they wanted. It would mean lots of business for the roadbuilders.

But we asked for time and used that time to

conduct a survey of attitudes among the press and the public. What we found out was that the public didn't want a second interstate system. What they wanted was an easier commute, lower operating expenses for their cars, safer transportation to school for their kids, lower food and fuel costs, and so forth.

So we went back to the organization's board of directors -- a tough-minded group of 20 highway builders -- and told them we'd have to do it differently, that people wouldn't buy new highways but that they'd buy better roads. We reported that our surveys showed that the best appeal we could make was to the values that people already embraced about prices and the ease of living, and that new values such as new highway systems were almost impossible to sell.

Now we're deeply involved in a program that translates road improvement into the values most people already hold dear, and the roadbuilders support it vigorously. In fact, we've been able to win millions of dollars in government funds for the kinds of projects we have proposed. It's a striking

example of how a public relations agency can change the direction of an entire industry by demonstrating, through a trusting relationship with its client, a new and profitable pathway to growth.

We are faced with this question: Can we get a fix on the work we should be doing? I say we can easily. In the last month these quotes came from leaders who voiced their concerns in conferences that I attended. These are quotes, too:

> "We have 25 issues under study. All 25 officers meet once a month and review reports on what happened in the past 30 days and what will happen in the next 30 days. We always plan in advance how to measure results."
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> * * *
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> "We're getting our prayer book and our pocketbook mixed up!"
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> * * *
>
> "We get 140,000 letters a year from consumers."
>
> * * *
>
> "We set up a Corporate Environmental Policy

Staff to monitor the whole company."

* * *

"We must understand the buildup of the fiscal crises that are coming. This year unemployment benefits will be about $12 billion compared to only $2 billion ten years ago. 75% of the lost earnings of the unemployed are now replaced, due to multiple paychecks in the family and the different tax effects on earnings and unemployment benefits.

"Then take Social Security; the tax rate has gone to 12% on the first $17,000 and it will go to 30% twenty years from now. Social Security payments this year will exceed $100 billion and yet the Social Security fund is only $40 billion, equal to five months' payments.

"In the aggregate, those presently covered by Social Security are entitled to three-trillion dollars. That's equal to one-half of the total capital in the United States. The implications of this are staggering and

it is tragic that the public is not aware of them."

* * *

A fascinating insight emerged last week when the New York Times interviewed Dr. Merril Eisenbud, one of the country's foremost environmentalists. He says the country is paying too much attention to trees, scenery and wildlife and not enough to public health. He charges that billions of dollars are being spent on overdesigned projects to control air and water pollution that will have small or unprovable effects on health.

At the same time, he says, cheaper programs of known effectiveness to control such major health problems as rat infestation, ragweed pollen, lead poisoning, smoking, malnutrition, bad housing and traffic and industrial accidents are being under-financed or even ignored. He goes on to say:

"We aren't keeping our eyes on what is truly important -- the health and well-being of people -- and on cost-benefit ratios

-- how much we can improve health with a given expenditure of money resources. What is amazing to me is how our American society, which venerates practicality and bottom-line reasoning, can have gone so far wrong."

Obvicusly, getting our society back on a common sense course is a vitally needed task, and if it is done it may well be because you and I are able to create better understanding. I say we can.

But others believe things are just too complex. We've gone past the point where the average voter can decide.

The rebuttal to this jumps into your mind, and I'd like to pass along a most useful key to how we can succeed.

Henry Boettinger in his most useful book, "Moving Mountains," writes:

"One of the wisest men I ever knew once told me that most of the troubles he had seen in a long life came from two perverse

tendencies in human nature: 1. Treating as simple, things that are actually complicated. 2. Making too complicated, things that are actually simple. He also confessed that he was seldom able to decide in advance which one had caused a particular trouble; he needed postmortems for an accurate diagnosis.

"So far, not much help. But assuming his observation on his experience was correct, what does it tell us? If true, then it indicates that human beings yearn for a certain limited amount of complexity."

I come back now to the striking appearance on our scene of your chairman and his idea of putting to work a sharpened interest in expectations, per se.

Think of these four circumstances that his approach would revolutionize:

One: Imagine that with every revered 5-year corporate plan, an equally anointed 5-year expectation plan were imperiously required. Do they mesh? Why not? What's to be done? Let's not be irrational.

Two: Imagine that every pollster in asking "what do you think?" also was compelled to ask "what do you expect?" Do they coincide? What good are the opinions, if their owners have more realistic expectations?

You might try this out as a parlor game, sometime.

Three: The more we know about expectations, the more we'll know about the self-fulfilling prophecies that we are entangled in, -- unbeknownst to us.

Fourth: we'd get action! How do you explain the complacency with which we await the imminent passage of the anti-lobbying law with its new dentures?

Do we really expect it will have little effect? I don't.

Much that we have gained by learning how to bring issues to the attention of voters and their choices will now be mothballed. I expect to hear some cries of rage, but it's a hard job to unlegislate a law these days. Remember Prohibition?

I'll leave untouched one thought that needs a lot of probing. We have much to do to make our

bright expectations come true. But the subterranean causes are the nightmares: the crashes and depressions; the wars and the iniquities of leaders; even the dawnings of atomic power and the age of space; the effects of these shocks override our more conscious cares, and will we ever learn how to deal with them?

I know exactly how to end these comments, -- just as one of my wisest boys counseled when he wrote:

"I've rattled on too long. I think that meeting client expectations can be summed up in what a basketball coach would call 'pursuit'. You could say that merely 'meeting' client expectations is not enough. A client doesn't expect us to 'meet' expectations; he expects us to 'lead' and suggest and go beyond -- pursue, recommend, lay a game plan, produce the materials, follow through. 'Meet' is a bad word. Anybody can meet."

* * *